

Such Nectar!

Photographs by
Miṣrani devī-dāśī

Text by Bhakṭa Jim

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Gaura-Nitai

Mother Miṣṛani was engaged in serving the Gaura-Nitai deities as a *pujari* from the first day I met her. A *pujari* is one who attends the images of God in the temple. She dresses them, garlands them, presents food offerings, fans them, offers the ghee lamp and does many other services. The *murti* (form) of God is considered to possess the full potency of God. God being infinite, any part of Him including His form also has infinite potency, or so we were instructed.

Serving the Deity on the altar is a special privilege that a devotee can lose through misbehavior.

Miṣṛani's Deities were two nearly identical figures called Gaura-Nitai. They represented two Indian saints named Chaitanya and Nityananda who started the movement in India that the modern Hare Krishna movement comes from. Chaitanya is considered by His followers to be a combined incarnation of Radha and Krishna who came to the material world to experience the ecstasy that His own worshipers feel.

One of Miṣṛani's responsibilities was putting the Deities to bed each

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night, which meant among other things removing the garlands They had been wearing. Anything that the Deities have used or had offered to Them is called *prasadam*. Devotees gain a special benediction when they take or eat *prasadam*. It is the Hare Krishna version of the Eucharist.

As a result of her duties Miṣrani always had two garlands each evening when I visited her. She wore one herself and gave the other to me. This was not really a sign of affection from her; she had to give the garland to *somebody* and as a guest of the temple I was the most likely candidate. It was the same when she gave me sweets to take home, or preached to me, or wore the white sari with the red border, or danced barefoot in the temple room, or encouraged me to chant, or did any of the seemingly hundreds of other things that attracted me to her. She would have done these things for any guest. But these things encouraged me to visit more often and take a more active role in the temple. I would help out in the kitchen on Saturdays and Sundays, I'd sweep the temple room, I'd follow the rules and chant and attend classes and make friends with other devotees, not all of them female. I would buy things to help Miṣrani do her Deity worship. For instance, once I bought false eyelashes that would be worn by Gaura-Nitai. I would get groceries that would be made into special offerings.

By doing these things for one another Miṣrani and I became genuine friends. The question that was never far from my thoughts was whether we could ever be more than that. Miṣrani had been in the movement many years. Before I would be allowed to marry her, assuming she was willing, I would have to be an initiated devotee. That would mean shaving my head, living in the temple, and not seeing her much if at all for months while I lived as a *bramachari* (celibate student). Of course Miṣrani was all for me shaving up, but that did not necessarily mean that she saw me as good husband material. She just assumed that anyone not living in the temple was

suffering and she didn't want me to suffer.

I didn't think of myself as someone who would ever fully surrender to Krishna. I had far too many doubts about things in the scriptures. If I had been forced to give a totally honest answer to the question of what in the movement I believed in I would have had to point to Miṣṛani and say, "Her". The movement would not consider that a good answer.

The Gaura-Nitai Deities had somehow belonged to a devotee named Shivarama who would be soon taking a vow of lifetime celibacy, the order of *sanyassin*. After that he would no longer be working on the altar. He had told Miṣṛani that if she would take a vow to never marry he would give her Gaura-Nitai as her personal Deities. Just what this meant in practical terms, what she could do that she hadn't been doing all along, I don't know. But it was definitely something she wanted to do so she agreed.

She marked the occasion in several ways. She shaved her head (something women in the movement normally did not do), she started dreaming about her Deities every night, and she made photo albums of pictures of the Deities. She asked me to provide a camera, film, flashbulbs, and photo albums for this purpose. I gave her an Instamatic camera my parents had given me (she wanted a better camera than that) and bought the rest. I bought albums for both of us and had two prints made of each picture so we could both have our own albums.

The period when she took these pictures was very pleasant for me. An outsider might think that having Miṣṛani take such a terrible vow would be discouraging, but I had so many other obstacles in my way that her vow felt almost like a kind of progress. At least she wouldn't marry anyone else.

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A month or two later the guru Tamal Krishna Goswami would move into the temple and my life would go to hell. If you are so inclined you can read about that in my book *The Life And Times Of Bhakta Jim*.

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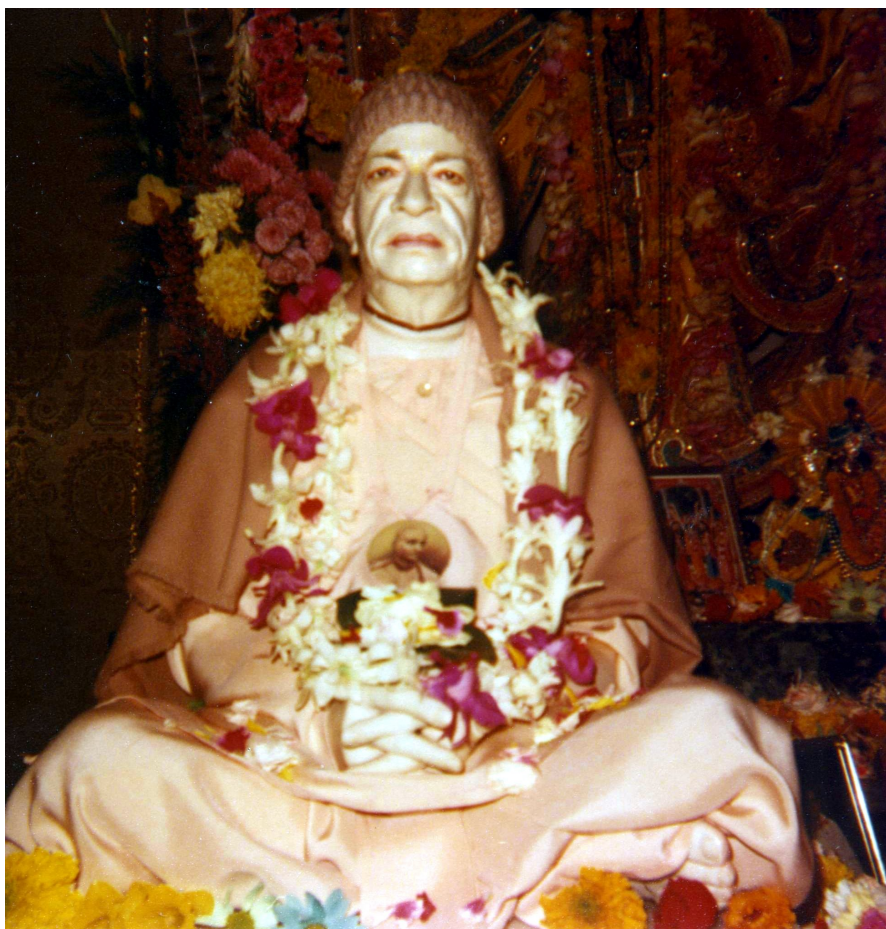


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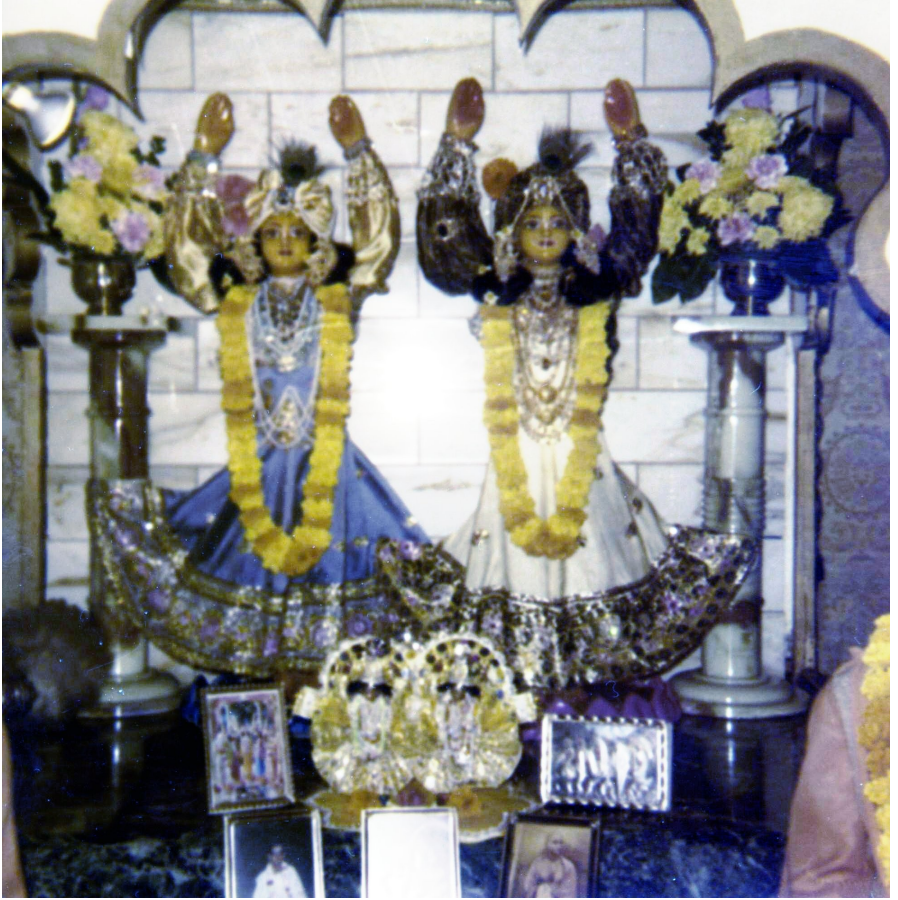
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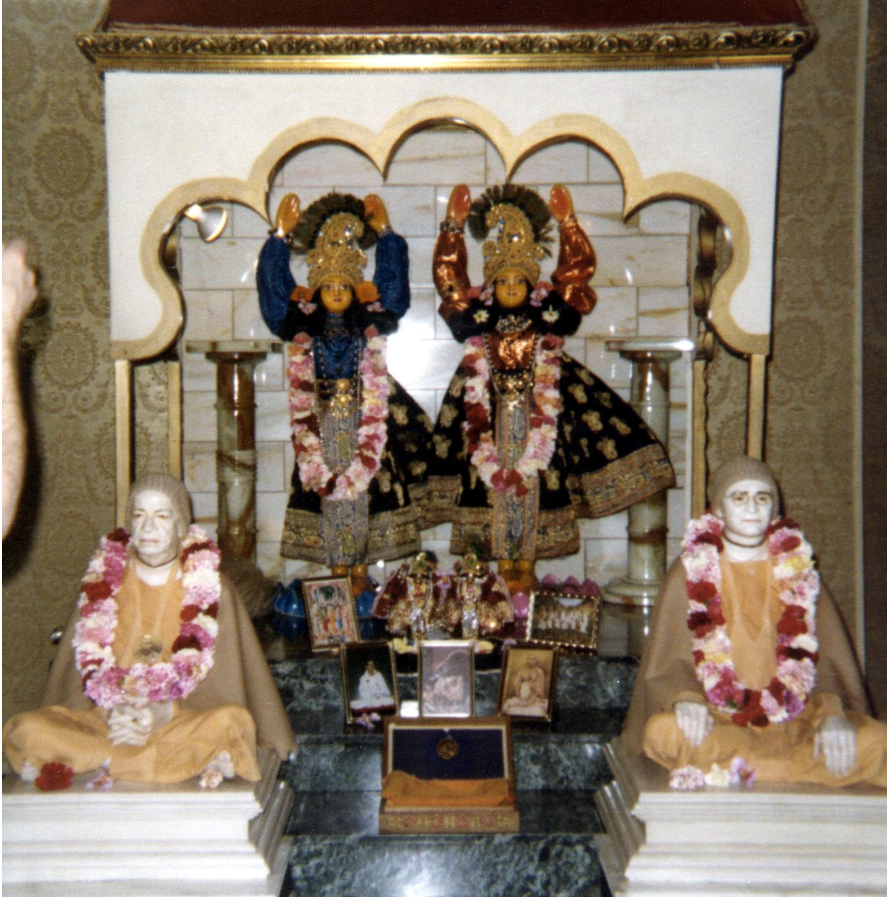
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Kishore-Kishori

Kishore-Kishori means "young boy and girl". I remember being told that once, but not when or by who. In any case, these *murtis* are those of Radha and Krishna.

Krishna was the son of Devaki, a princess. Her brother Kansa heard a prophecy that the eighth son of Devaki would kill him, so he imprisoned Devaki and her husband and killed all her children. Two of her children escaped this fate and ended up growing up among cowherds in a place called Vrindavana. The older child was named Balarama, and the younger was Krishna. When the boys came of age They left Vrindavana, killed Kansa, and became princes. Krishna founded a city called Dwaraka where he lived with 16,108 wives and each wife had her own palace. Krishna became friends with Arjuna and helped him win the battle of Kurukshetra. It was on this battlefield that He spoke the Bhagavad Gita.

While Krishna did remarkable things as a prince, it is His life among the cowherds that His devotees are most interested in. This life was full of miracles, too. He killed many demons, He showed His mother

the entire universe within His mouth, and He held aloft Govardhana Hill and used it like an umbrella to protect the inhabitants of Vrindavana from a terrible storm. He also did things a normal child would do, like stealing butter.

Of all the things He did in Vrindavana the most significant to devotees is His love for the gopis, or cowherd girls. These cowherd girls loved Krishna and met with him at night, even though they were married to others. Krishna playing His flute as a cowherd is like a call to the gopis to abandon their worldly responsibilities and love Him.

The girl to the right of Krishna is Srimati Radharani, the supreme lover of Krishna and greatest of all the gopis. In most temples devoted to Krishna She is worshiped alongside Krishna. You never will see an altar where Krishna is by Himself.

The pose Krishna takes in this murti is associated with Him. Any statue of Krishna you are likely to see shows Krishna standing like this: barefoot, with right foot crossed over the left and with arms raised as if about to play His flute. There is even a Hatha Yoga pose called the Lord Krishna pose which involves standing just like Krishna does.

These Deities occupied the middle altar at the Evanston temple. They receive a great deal of attention on the occasion of Krishna's appearance day (birthday), which comes in August. On that day in 1978 my father and my brother came to the Hare Krishna temple to see why I was spending so much time there. I had been there most of the day helping Miṣrani in the kitchen and fasting. Miṣrani took a short break to speak with my father, who told her that his son was "one of your followers." She was amused at that; the idea that she, herself, might have followers.

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Of course she didn't have followers. She just had me.





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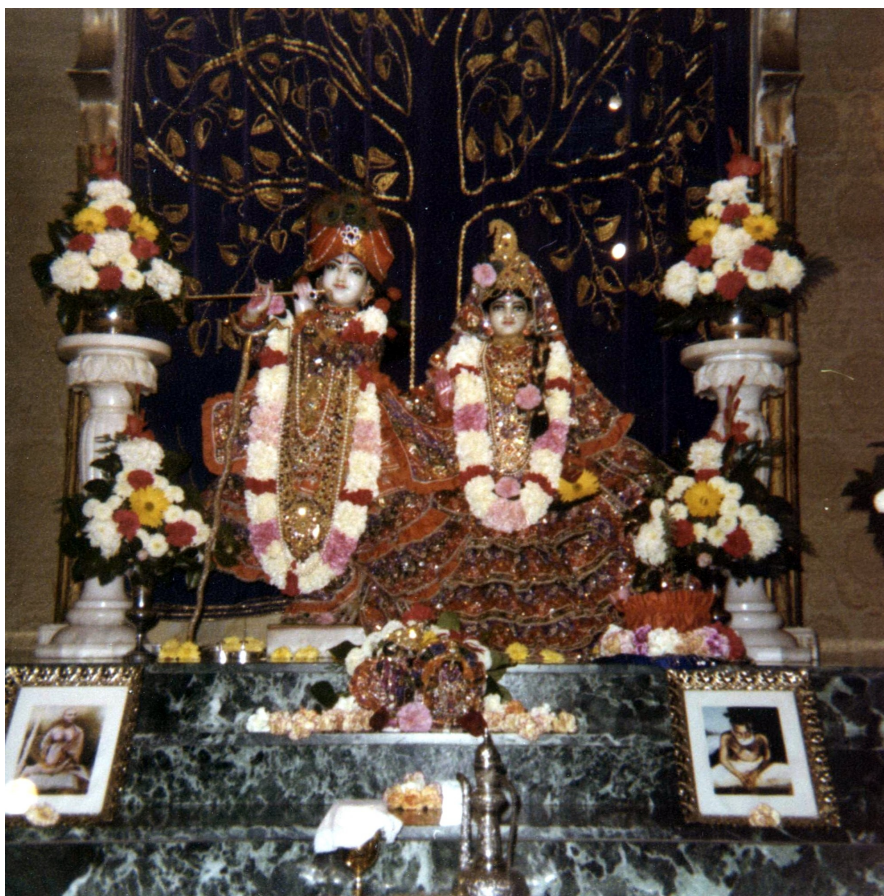
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Jagannatha

Jagannatha is a very different image of God. As I said before, the idea of worshiping the form of God is that God, being infinite, any part of Him including His form and His names also has infinite potency and worshiping that form or chanting those names is as good as being in the presence of God. The problem with Jagannatha is that He doesn't look like Krishna or indeed like much of anything.

There are several versions of how Lord Jagannatha came to be, and the one that has found favor with the Hare Krishna movement is that a craftsman was carving a statue of Krishna out of wood and was interrupted in his work. He refused to finish the work and hence the statue was worshiped in its unfinished state. The statue of Jagannath does look a bit like the torso of a statue with big eyes painted on the chest. One problem with this story is that Jagannatha is not alone on the altar. With Him are similar torso-like statues representing Balarama, Krishna's older brother, and Subhadra, Krishna's younger sister who would become the wife of Arjuna, the hearer of the Bhagavad Gita.

Jagannatha was the very first Deity worshiped in the Hare Krishna movement. There are fewer rules to follow when worshiping

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Jagannatha and fewer possibilities of committing offenses. Srila Prabhupada, the founder of the Hare Krishna movement, had a set of Jagannatha Deities when he was a child. After I left the movement Mother Pashupati, a good friend of Miṣrani, wrote to me and asked for money to have Jagannatha Deities carved for her daughter as a Christmas gift. (I didn't give her the money).

Jagannatha doesn't get as much attention in the temple as the other Deities (at least by those not working on the altar), but one day a year there is a big Ratha Yatra festival where Jagannatha rides in a big cart. On July 4th, 1978 this cart was a float in the Independence Day parade in Chicago. I was one of those pulling the cart. It was a good sized cart, but the ones in India are much larger. There is a tradition that anyone crushed under the wheels of the Ratha Yatra cart achieves liberation. This tradition led to the English word "Juggernaut". The cart we had in Chicago wasn't big enough to crush anyone, but that didn't stop Miṣrani and Pashupati from helpfully suggesting that I might throw myself under the wheels.

It wasn't just Jagannath that was on parade. The Gaura-Nitai Deities also had Their own small float. After the parade there was a big festival with free food, stalls selling books, etc. My parents came to see the parade with me. This was the first time my father saw Miṣrani. She was fanning the Gaura-Nitai Deities at the time. He came over and told me, "There's this crazy girl over there fanning a statue!" It didn't seem like the best time to arrange an introduction, so I didn't.

Miṣrani devi-dasi



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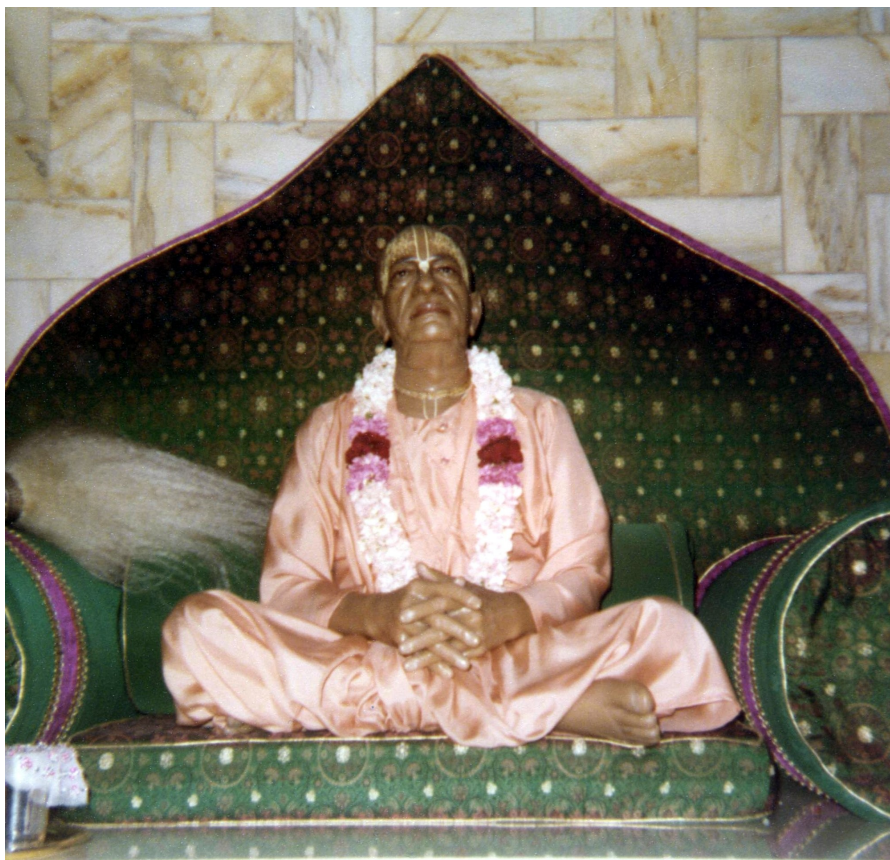
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Around The Temple

These were just various images of things going on at the temple.
Most of them have something to do with visiting gurus.



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About The Photographs

The pictures in this book were taken with a Kodak Instamatic camera. The Instamatic was a camera for snapshots. You couldn't change the focus or the exposure. You lined up the picture by using a viewfinder, a little window above the lens itself. This gave an approximation of what was visible through the lens. Sometimes the approximation was a little off, which would explain why some of these pictures are not centered as well as they could be.



Film for the Instamatic came in cartridges, so you didn't need to go to a dark place to load film into the camera. A cartridge could hold 24 pictures. You had to buy the cartridge, take the pictures, then take the cartridge with pictures in it to a drugstore to get the film developed and have prints made. This was quite expensive.

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The Instamatic camera had flashcubes which would flash four times, one on each side. Sometimes the flash would not work. Before you could take a picture you had to move a lever to advance the film into position. This limited how fast you could take pictures.



The important thing to understand here is the world of 1979 was very different from today. Back then you couldn't take hundreds of pictures of nothing in particular and have them posted to Facebook a minute later, all for free.

These pictures were in three albums that I had kept for over thirty years. The years had not been kind to these pictures. Some of them got damaged when I removed them from the albums. The dyes on all of them had faded. Fortunately, we are not living in 1979. I was able to scan the pictures at 600 DPI, crop the edges using *The GIMP* (GNU Image Manipulation Program), and restore the colors to their original shade and brilliance using the White Balance filter of The

GIMP. The pictures you see in this book have never looked better, not even on the day I got them back from the drugstore. Even the pictures where the flash didn't go off look pretty good.

It is something of a miracle that these photos still exist. I left the Hare Krishna movement because my parents had me deprogrammed. After that they got rid of anything that might remind me of the Hare Krishnas. They didn't throw out my books, because destroying books didn't seem right, but they did make me find a library to donate them to. Somehow or other they didn't throw out the three albums.

One thing they did throw out which I missed very much was a really nice *kurta*, which is a kind of shirt that devotees wear. This was a gift to me from Mother Sadbhuja, another friend of Miṣrani. I had helped her move back to the women's ashram when she left her husband after a very brief marriage. She never told me what had led to the breakup and I certainly didn't ask, but I guess having somebody to help her move out was a comfort to her. To thank me she insisted that I take this really nice kurta that had belonged to her husband. I wore it at the temple later and she told me I looked "very funky".

That gave me a nice feeling. When Miṣrani first saw me wearing devotee clothing she said I looked "really ecstatic", which is how devotees describe pretty much everything, so it didn't mean much. But devotees generally do not describe things as looking "very funky". Sadbhuja had spoken from her heart. On top of that, she was a real beauty.

I cherished the memory of Sadbhuja calling me "very funky" and I just wished I had the damned shirt to go with it.

About The Authors

Miṣṛaṇi devi-dāṣi

Miṣṛaṇi devi-dāṣi was an active member of the Hare Krishna movement from 1973 to 1980. She currently lives in British Columbia, Canada with her family. She is an avid drummer, gardener, and has recently become a grandmother. Miṣṛaṇi is also caring for her 90 year old mother, and so is living the dream of being with four generations. She still loves Gaur Nitai!!!

Bhākta Jim

Bhākta Jim was involved with the Hare Krishna movement from 1977-1980. He is currently living in a suburb of Chicago and works as a Systems Analyst. He is the author of *The Life And Times Of Bhākta Jim* as well as two books on educational software. Meeting Miṣṛaṇi devi-dāṣi in 1977 changed his life. He has not been entirely successful in changing it back.